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DIRECTORATE OF  
INTELLIGENCE

# Intelligence Memorandum

THE LAO PATRIOTIC FRONT'S STATEMENT OF 6 MARCH

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
Directorate of Intelligence  
19 March 1970

## INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

The Lao Patriotic Front's Statement of 6 MarchIntroduction

The Lao Communists' statement of 6 March is a mischievous document, cleverly designed to play on strong desires in Vientiane for an end to the war, to exploit possible differences of interest between the US and Lao Government leaders, and to gain a decided propaganda advantage. Its principal objective appears to be to force the US to end the bombing in Laos or to suffer the political consequences of refusing to do so. The statement also raises complex questions regarding North Vietnam's intentions in Laos and South Vietnam. Is the statement, for example, Hanoi's opening move in a new political-military campaign to make the problem of Laos an integral part of the war in South Vietnam, not only by bringing pressures to end the bombing in the Laotian infiltration corridor, but also by helping to foster war-weariness in the US? Or is it less ambitious? The statement may be what it purports to be: the Communists' position for negotiating an end to the fighting in Laos. An examination of what the enemy may reasonably hope to achieve in Laos, as well as of Communist strengths and weaknesses there, may help us to determine the pitfalls as well as the possible opportunities that the statement holds for the Lao Government and the US.

Note: This memorandum was produced solely by CIA. It was prepared by the Office of Current Intelligence and coordinated with the Office of National Estimates and the Clandestine Service.

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The Statement Itself

1. The meat of the statement is included in "five proposals" for a "political solution to the problem of Laos." The first proposal includes the demand that the US "stop escalating the war, cease the bombing of Lao territory," and withdraw advisers, military personnel, weapons, and war materiel. The second and third proposals are largely devoted to a reiteration of principles set forth in the 1962 Accords, including neutrality, respect for the throne, and democratic elections. The fourth and fifth proposals define procedures by which a new "democratic government of national union" can be established.

2. At least two important aspects of the statement need to be emphasized. The first is that it is meant to be taken seriously. The fact that it was issued at a time when the problem of Laos has emerged as a prominent international issue, that it was launched in Hanoi rather than in an obscure Communist-held area of Laos, and that it has been described by the Soviet ambassador in Vientiane as an "important" document, all indicate that the Communists are ascribing some importance to it. The second feature is that it is not merely a reiteration of Communist platitudes, canards, and obfuscations. It is instead the most specific proposal for a new political arrangement in Laos since the Communist ministers left Vientiane in early 1963.

3. The document offers--setting aside for the moment the bombing halt precondition--some relatively reasonable suggestions for a political "solution" in Laos. In fact, there is even a somewhat conciliatory tone to those proposals bearing on the mechanics of such a settlement. The Communists, for example, make no demands that Prime Minister Souvanna, who is mentioned only once in the text, step down or that the composition of the government be adjusted prior to consultations. The statement makes no territorial claims on behalf of the Laotian Communists. Rather than trying to bend the tripartite arrangement to the advantage of the Communist-leaning "neutralists" by portraying them as the "true neutralists"--something the Communists have been trying to do for a number of years--the statement asserts only that the "parties concerned"

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shall hold a consultative political conference composed of representatives of all "Lao parties." The Communists indicate clearly, of course, that these consultations and decisions are not going to be made in forums in which they are outvoted by Souvanna and the rightists. Their answer, at least for the purposes of this statement, is to rely on the "principle of equality."

4. A sense of realism also pervades the suggestion that the "unification" of Laos will be achieved after a consultative political conference has been convened and has established a provisional coalition government. No timetable is set up for such unification, and the proposal, in effect, legitimizes the de facto partition of the country. In the meantime, neither side would encroach on the territory of the other. The conditions on the ground in Laos are now such that a cease-fire line could have real meaning, more than in 1962 when neutralist and Pathet Lao forces shared the Plaine des Jarres, and considerably more than would be the case in South Vietnam.

5. Both in terms of substance and rhetoric, the 6 March proposal is clearly and cleverly designed to be attractive to the Lao leaders in Vientiane. Relatively free of threats and bluster, the document makes an obvious effort to blame the US for the woes of the Lao people. It comes close to saying that if the government in Vientiane would rid itself of its US allies, particularly if it got the US to end the bombing "completely," then the Communists would prove to be reasonable men, and peace could be restored in Laos.

6. The statement is certainly more than just a siren song to the leaders in Vientiane. The fact that it includes some provisions that would be unpalatable to the government, provisions that are designed to protect and advance Communist interests rather than promote the notion that peace in Laos is right around the corner, suggests that the Communists themselves view the statement as a real negotiating position on which they are ready to reach a political arrangement with the government. The clearest sign of this lies in the assertion that the parties must agree on the

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establishment of a "security zone" in which the consultative political conference and the provisional coalition government would be protected from "sabotage or pressures by forces from inside or outside." This particular proposal does not make the statement more acceptable in Vientiane--quite the contrary, for it presumably means surrendering Vientiane as the country's administrative capital--nor is there any propaganda advantage to be gained by pressing it. In Communist eyes, however, it is a practical necessity if they are to have any hope of achieving their political ends by means short of completely overrunning the country. Through bitter experience, they have learned that they cannot function in a coalition government that is located in a capital city garrisoned by hostile troops.

#### Why Now?

7. The timing of the statement may provide some clues as to its purpose. It was issued after the retrieval of the Plaine des Jarres, which until Vang Pao's offensive last year had been in Communist hands since 1963, but before the Communists pushed into sensitive government-held areas. Thus, at present neither side can claim a distinct or clear-cut territorial advantage. It had been expected that before moving toward negotiations, the Communists would re-occupy all areas that were under their control in 1962. They have not yet done so, and today control fewer people and little more strategic territory than they did in 1962 or 1963.

8. This lends some credibility to their offer to seek a "political solution," and it probably will make the bid more acceptable in Vientiane. At the same time, however, by issuing the statement the Communists provided themselves with political justification for intensified military activity. The Communists presumably felt that they had at least to make some positive-sounding response to Souvanna's political offers, first to "neutralize" the Plaine des Jarres and, more recently, to consult with the signers of the 1962 declaration.

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On Stopping the Bombing

9. If the statement is a more or less legitimate negotiating instrument, what do the Communists hope to gain? The most obvious answer to the question, and possibly the only real one, lies in the Communists' demand that before the "Lao parties" can meet, "the United States . . . stop completely the bombing of Lao territory without posing any condition."

10. There are two fundamental ways in which the Communists (and to all intents and purposes this means the North Vietnamese) can get the US to stop the bombing in north Laos and in the infiltration corridor. One of these is to bring pressure upon the US; the other--more remote but still worthy of discussion--is to persuade Washington that it is in its own interests to do so. The legal or political basis for the bombing--particularly in the infiltration corridor--depends on the support of the government in Vientiane, which means Souvanna Phouma. The Communists have attacked the legitimacy of that government and Souvanna's right to the title of prime minister, but without effect. Their answer, then, is to drive a wedge between Souvanna and the US, eventually causing the prime minister to call publicly for a cessation of US bombing. Souvanna is a Lao nationalist, and the Communists may hope that if they demonstrate by action that they are willing to make major concessions to bring a surcease in the fighting in Laos, then Souvanna would choose Lao over US interests.

11. There is also a very real possibility that war weariness in Vientiane may be an increasingly important factor on the Lao scene. The Lao have been at war for at least a decade, the emotional and material drain on a gentle people has been great, and surely there must be considerable desire to see the fighting stopped. During the dark days of the 1969 "military crisis" even some of the rightist leaders--those who pass for hawks in Vientiane--were murmuring about the possibility of a bombing halt, a plea to the United Nations, or some other way of getting Laos out of its quandary. But even if such sentiment is strong, how does Hanoi turn it to its advantage?

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12. The trouble with the scenario is that Lao and US interests are not so easily divisible. The Communists must recognize, for example, that to a large extent Souvanna's position as prime minister and, more important, that of the entire neutralist-rightist apparatus, rests on the support of the US. Souvanna almost certainly realizes that if he bucks the US on such a crucial issue as a bombing halt in the infiltration corridor, he leaves himself vulnerable to his rightist critics who would like nothing better than to see him retreat to France. It does not seem likely, nor has he given any sign, that Souvanna will allow himself to be maneuvered into such a position. Indeed, Souvanna had made it clear both in statements to the North Vietnamese ambassador last year and in a press conference only last weekend that he will not readily lend himself to manipulation. His public position now is that what happens in the infiltration corridor is a subject for settlement between the US and North Vietnam. He has all but said that he can no more control US bombing in that portion of Laos than he can stop North Vietnam from infiltrating troops and supplies there.

13. The North Vietnamese are not so naive as to believe that Souvanna or the other Lao leaders will call for a "complete" US bombing halt at the first sign of Communist reasonableness. They know that the Laotians must be brought along slowly with judicious use of the carrot and the stick. After experiencing two years of increasingly heavy air attacks in the north, Hanoi must know that military pressure by itself brings more bombing, not less. Their tactical problem is to maintain a degree of military pressure without destroying the credibility of their "peace proposal." In the effort to achieve this, they may prove to be quite flexible. As in Vietnam, the North Vietnamese may not hold to the demand that all bombing in Laos stop before any substantive discussions can take place. They might, for example, accept Souvanna's offer to curtail the bombing in the north in return for a phase-down in the North Vietnamese presence there, or they might simply offer to talk about a bombing halt as they did in Vietnam in 1968.

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Creating a Full-Blown Crisis in Laos

14. The Laotians are not the avenue through which Hanoi can bring pressure to bear on the US on the bombing issue. The North Vietnamese may calculate that they can create, or help build, enough anxiety in the US about the "deteriorating" situation in Laos and prospects of deepened US involvement there to serve their purposes with respect to the Vietnam war. Their efforts would presumably take two different, but not necessarily mutually exclusive, forms. One would be to reinforce the war-weariness among the American people, to foster a plague-on-all-their-houses attitude that might--or so Hanoi would hope--force the administration to accelerate the withdrawal of US troops from Vietnam, be more agreeable to North Vietnamese suggestions on how to negotiate an end to the fighting in South Vietnam, or perhaps agree to end the bombing of the infiltration corridor. The second trend Hanoi may hope to set in motion would involve US agreement to end the bombing in the infiltration corridor as a prerequisite for a Lao settlement, i.e., the US accepts the Lao Front's recent proposal rather than facing the prospect of a much wider Lao war.

15. If Hanoi is embarking on this course, it must either be willing to set aside the political considerations that have heretofore kept it from establishing Laos as a major theater of the war--something that has always been within its power--or somehow to mitigate them by carefully circumscribing Communist military activities. There are many reasons why North Vietnam has not moved to the Mekong in past years, among them the higher priority given to operations in South Vietnam and the fear of US reaction. Another important reason is that a blatant invasion of a neutral country, whose neutrality Hanoi had agreed to respect, would entail considerable political disadvantages. North Vietnamese aggression in Laos is bad form; it weakens the Communist claim to moral superiority. These considerations may seem trivial compared to the possible rewards of making Laos a major place of confrontation, and indeed they are if Hanoi has decided that such a

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confrontation is vital to achieve its purposes in South Vietnam. But Hanoi is very sensitive to charges of aggression in Laos. One of the major points the North Vietnamese ambassador made to Souvanna last year was that he should tone down public charges against Hanoi's activities in Laos. North Vietnam is vulnerable to the assertion that its behavior in Laos demonstrates that it does not respect treaties or agreements it has entered into. The charge lessens Communist credibility in the Vietnamese negotiations. It also undermines many of the arguments of American critics of the US effort in Southeast Asia.

16. The problem for the North Vietnamese, then, is to work up a crisis in Laos without making it appear that they are at fault or are in the thick of things. The weakness of the Pathet Lao and the unpredictability of the Vientiane government's reaction to any given military action makes this a difficult proposition. Government operations such as the capture of the Plaine des Jarres last August somewhat ease the Communist political, if not military, task by providing some justification for taking the offensive. Nevertheless, as soon as the Communists come out of the hills of eastern Laos and threaten Mekong lowlands or the major towns, their aggression is virtually undeniable, and with this most of their political advantage is lost. Whether a real crisis in Laos, one that involved attacks by fire on the major towns and substantial threats to Luang Prabang and Vientiane, would contribute to the American people's war weariness or would, by demonstrating Communist perfidy, only increase the desire to see it through and "win the war" would be hard for Hanoi to predict. It is doubtful that Hanoi even thinks that it knows the answer.

#### The War in the North

17. The discussion up to now has implied not only that a bombing halt is what the Communists are after in the 6 March statement--the document almost says as much--but also that it is an end to the bombing in the infiltration corridor that the Communists

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want most of all. This would presumably allow them to move men and supplies unimpeded into South Vietnam. Although they are able to move ample supplies through the corridor now despite the bombings, it is clear that an end to the bombing would make their task a good deal easier. We have already indicated that the Communists' leverage on the US is limited. They can create conditions that would be very embarrassing to the US, but they cannot guarantee that this would cause Washington to call off the air interdiction effort. Analogies with the bombing of North Vietnam lose some of their weight when it is recognized that the US is bombing a virtually uninhabited region where, by their own assertion, North Vietnamese forces are not located.

18. All this being the case, is it possible that the North Vietnamese are also interested in a reduction, if not ending, of the bombing in northern Laos? Certainly they must calculate that the prospects of getting such a stand-down there are far better than they are in the infiltration corridor. If this is what it is after, then North Vietnam would have to call a halt to major offensive operations. This should not pose any great problems for it since, with the recapture of the Plaine des Jarres, it controls most of the areas it considers vital to protecting its border and Lao Communist interests. Vang Pao's guerrilla forces would be a thorny problem. The 6 March statement, in an obvious allusion to these forces, states only that they should withdraw "forthwith from the areas they have occupied and resettle in their native places those people who have been forcibly removed from there." This could be interpreted to refer to positions other than the Long Tieng - Sam Thong complex.

19. Even if the Communists are interested in de-escalating the fighting in the north, this does not mean that they will let up the pressure in the Plaine des Jarres area or elsewhere in the country. If the 6 March "peace proposal" is to have any effect in Vientiane, the Lao leaders must be convinced that there is some reason to negotiate. How much military pressure will be necessary to get the government in a proper frame of mind is presumably something the Communists

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are now trying to find out. It is clear that the Communists, at minimum, are intent on eliminating any government capabilities to threaten their gains in the Plaine des Jarres area in the future.

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#### How Vientiane Sees the Offer

20. Prime Minister Souvanna, although pleased by the recent turn of events that has brought Laos into the political arena, does not appear to be prepared to negotiate a restructuring of the coalition government to the liking of the Communists. He has nevertheless indicated interest in opening a dialogue with his half brother Prince Souphanouvong, emphasizing his willingness to have discussions, but rejecting forced negotiations either with Souphanouvong or through the Geneva mechanism. Souvanna has softened his initial public position for a cease-fire agreement with the Communists by indicating that he would be willing to accept a cease-fire before a North Vietnamese troop withdrawal, provided the enemy stopped all offensive activity and permitted the International Control Commission to send observers into Communist-controlled territory. Souvanna remains skeptical of the Communist overture and believes it is a North Vietnamese ruse to obtain a bombing halt. It is not clear what effect the Communist campaign against Long Tieng will have on Souvanna, but he will probably be under considerable pressure from rightist elements to forgo any political initiatives toward the Lao Communists at this juncture.

#### Relationship to Vietnam Negotiations

21. The Communist statement on Laos obviously must be viewed in the context of North Vietnam's broader Southeast Asian objectives, even though its relationship to Hanoi's Vietnam strategy is obscure. Hanoi doubtless would like, among other things, to maneuver Souvanna and the US into a position where maintenance of air attacks on the infiltration corridor would at best be politically difficult and perhaps in time untenable. But for reasons set forth earlier, Hanoi is unlikely to calculate that the

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bombing of the panhandle will be stopped merely by Communist overtures on Laos. Therefore, if the Communists want to establish the Laotian initiative as a credible basis for stopping the bombing of all Laotian territory, including the infiltration corridor, they probably calculate that at some point they will have to make the move feasible for the US in the Vietnam context. This would almost certainly require an indication of substantial Communist flexibility on Vietnam designed to interest the US in pursuing a general cease-fire and separate, but parallel political negotiations on Laos and Vietnam.

22. With this in mind, it is worthwhile noting that the 6 March statement coincides with a number of very tentative signs that something new is afoot on the Communist side in Paris. The signs are not altogether persuasive, and they do not add up to a coherent picture of Vietnamese Communist intentions. They include the return to Paris last month of politburo negotiator Le Duc Tho and, more recently, a "threat" conveyed outside official channels that the Communists might pull out of the talks before long. We doubt that Hanoi intends to carry out this "threat" just yet; in fact, it probably is merely part of an evolving Communist effort to probe the US position and perhaps bring some movement to the talks.

23. It is not at all clear what the Communists are aiming for in Paris, whether or how badly they want some progress, or what they might be willing to pay to get it. The statement on Laos, however, adds to an impression that the Communists have embarked on a new and wide-ranging diplomatic venture, probably growing out of the latest strategy pow-wow in Hanoi completed in January just before Le Duc Tho left for Paris.

24. Even if Communist motives in issuing the Laotian statement at this time are not so ambitious, Hanoi may reason that a display of moderation on Laos might gain some mileage in the context of Vietnam and the Paris talks. It will, for example, dramatize the Communist contention that only the US stands between an end to hostilities in Southeast Asia and political negotiations among the "interested parties."

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Unlike Laos, South Vietnam has no precedents of coalition government, tacit territorial division, and political negotiations among the indigenous belligerents, but the Communists will probably argue at some time that if such principles can achieve a "settlement" in Laos they are applicable to South Vietnam as well.

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